John Watkins:
Architect
Builder
Bridge Builder
Sawmill Operator
Carpenter
Coffin Builder
Bishop
?
was a midwife

JOHN WATKINS AND WIVES

John Watkins, son of Thomas John Edward Watkins and Sarah Jordon.

Born April 13, 1834, at Maidstone, Kent, England.

Married Margaret Ackhurst May 4, 1851, England. Endowed March 21, 1863.

Married Harriet Steele 1858 Salt Lake. Endowed March 21, 1863.

Married Mary Ann Sawyer March 21, 1863, Salt Lake Endowment House. Died December 23, 1902, Midway.

Margaret Ackhurst, daughter of Edward Ackhurst and Elizabeth Wildish.

Born October 15, 1831, at Faversham, England. Married John Watkins May 4, 1851, in England. Endowed March 21, 1863, Salt Lake Endowment House. Died February 14, 1905, Midway.

Harriet Steel Watkins, daughter of John Steel and Maria Woods. Born December 5, 1841, at Haverly, Stofford, England. Married John Watkins 1858, Salt Lake City. Endowed March 21, 1863, Endowment House. Died March 11, 1884, Midway.

Mary Ann Sawyer Watkins, daughter of Joseph Sawyer and Henrietta Tranham. Born August 17, 1848, at Swansea, Wales.

Married John Watkins March 21, 1863, Endowment House.

Died April 22, 1918, Salt Lake City, Utah.

John Watkins had seven brothers and one sister.

The Watkins were a family of means and property. Architecture and building was a profession handed down from a long line of ancestors. It was natural that John should be trained in his father's profession as an architect and builder. He had a very fine voice and had musical training. He was a soloist in the cathedral. The family belonged to the Church of England.

John married at the early age of 17 to Margaret Ackhurst of Faversham. They moved to London where he readily found work at his trade. There he met the Elders of the LDS Church and was converted to Mormonism. He and his wife Margaret were baptized in 1852 by Elder William Eastrone and confirmed by George Denise in the Finsbury Chapel, London, England. His mother, a faithful member of the Church of England, became very bitter towards John when she found he had joined the Latter-day Saint Church. His father died and he was left to settle the estate as well as take care of his own financial affairs before he could leave England. He made great sacrifices in order to dispose of his property that he might emigrate to America. Finally, he and his wife Margaret and their two children sailed from Liverpool on the sail ship "Horizon" May 26, 1856, with 856 passengers all of the Mormon faith bound for Boston.

Edward Martin was captain of the company. These emigrants reached Boston June 28, 1856, and traveled by boxcar to Iowa, the outfitting point for that year's emigrants. They built hand carts of green, unseasoned wood with wooden axles and boxes which caused much trouble later on. The provisions which were very meager were pulled on the carts and some small children rode. Everyone old enough or strong enough had to walk and help pull the carts. Edward Martin was captain of the company with Daniel Tyler assisting. John Watkins was bugler.

They left Florence, Nebraska July 26, 1856, and after a tedious journey full of incidents of suffering hardship, freezing, exposure and starving and running into an early snow storm, they were met by a relief company sent out by President Brigham Young. It was a sad chapter in Church history. About half of that company lost their lives. What was left arrived in Salt Lake City November 30, 1856.

That same year he moved to Provo where in that growing community he was in great demand as a builder and also because of his musical ability. In December, 1856 the first brass band in Utah was organized and he was called to be the leader. They played at the first Territorial Fair in Salt Lake.

He donated a lot of time and talent on the old LDS Tabernacle in Provo. In 1857 he built Provo's first opera house as well as stores, homes and other buildings.

He bought and owned the first organ in Provo and south of Salt Lake. It was hauled to Provo by ox team. As it was easy to lift around, it became a community organ. Whenever there was an entertainment, it was loaded on a wagon and taken to accompany the singers and sometimes to churches and funerals as well. When the family moved to Provo Valley, it served the same purpose and popularity.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was advocating plural marriage at that time, and John Watkins with his great faith and testimony was willing to obey the Church leaders. He was a great friend of Thomas Alsop. At their home he met Harriet Steel and they were married in Brigham Young's office in 1858. Later when the Endowment House was completed, he took his wives, Margaret and Harriet, to be sealed to him, and also at that time married his third wife, Mary Ann Sawyer, March 21, 1863. After the ceremony they returned to Provo where the three women and their families lived together in one house.

In the summer of 1865 the Watkins family left Provo, a fast growing and thriving community, and entered the Provo Valley with all their possessions to face the hardships and pioneering of this more remote section.

At this time the family consisted of John, his three wives, and eight living children. All three women had a small baby in long clothes, as was the style for babies in that day. Mary Ann's baby, Joseph, was born July 10, 1864. Harriet's baby, Arthur, was born October 22, 1864, and Margaret's baby, Alfred, was born November 13, 1864. They settled in the lower settlement on Snake Creek.

Later when Indian troubles forced the settlements to move together at the public square called Fort Midway, the Watkins family also moved there.

After the peace treaties with the Indians the people of Fort Midway began moving out of the fort: but instead of moving back to the old settlement, they began building their homes close to the fort. This became the town of Midway.

John Watkins secured two pieces of land, one a block south and east of the fort where he built a rock house with three apartments for his immediate needs. The other piece of property was a block east of the fort. Here he began to plan and build the house of his hopes and dreams. He located the clay, made the brick, sawed out the sandstone blocks, and built the first brick house in Wasatch County in 1870.

He built other homes in Midway similar to his own: one for George Bonner, Sr., one for William Bonner, one for George Bonner, Jr., one for William Coleman and several in Provo and Springville.

On July 27, 1869 John Watkins was called to preside over the Charleston Branch and was ordained a Seventy. March 30, 1872 he was ordained a High Priest. He never moved to Charleston, but traveled back and forth, which at that time was very difficult as there were no bridges. During high water the mules would have to swim the river and the water would come into the carriage bed. He became strongly attached to the Charleston people during the seven years he presided over the branch.

At a conference held at Heber City July

14, 1877, John Watkins was set apart as First Counselor to David Van Wagenen who was appointed Bishop of Midway.

Building was John Watkin's line of work, so he had charge of the building and decorating of the new rock meeting house which was built on the old public square.

In January, 1893, Bishop Van Wagenen asked for his release as Bishop, and Apostle John Henry Smith came out to Midway. He stayed at the home of John Watkins as the visiting authorities always did. On the way to church in the afternoon, he told John Watkins he was there to reorganize the ward and he was to be the Bishop. He chose Alva J. Alexander as First Counselor and Conrad Abbegglen as Second Counselor. He was ordained Bishop by Apostle John Henry Smith on January 29, 1893.

Bishop Watkins was a very forceful speaker. No one went to sleep in church while he was preaching. He was thoroughly converted in his beliefs and fearlessly and firmly presented them to others. He knew the Golden Rule and lived by it.

His duties as Bishop were many, caring for the poor and needy. At the time it was a great responsibility because so many emigrants arrived in need of work and help. The tithing was also a problem in those days, because it was paid in produce instead of cash and was anything people happened to raise. Sometimes things were not even saleable, but had to be accounted for in cash. They came in all hours of the day and someone had to be ready to weigh the hay, measure wheat or potatoes, see that they were properly protected from frost and weather. Many times produce had to be hauled to Park City to be converted into cash. Eggs, butter, chickens, fruit and cattle, all had to be taken care of until sold.

John Watkins served a number of years as select man of Wasatch County. He, with the help of Alva J. Alexander, engineered the Midway Waterworks System, and he became the first president. He built the first suspension bridge over the Provo River between Midway and Heber which gave good service with repairs on it until 1948 when it was replaced by a cement bridge.

He located the present cemetery site and with the assistance of Alva J. Alexander surveyed and platted it. At first it was owned and maintained by the Ecclesiastical ward, but later was turned over to the Midway Town.

When people died in the community at a time when coffins were hard to get, John Watkins built them of pine lumber and lined them with soft fluffy cotton and covered it with silk and trimmed the sides with lace. The outside was covered with velvet.

After a useful and busy life he passed away after a severe illness, December 23, 1902, and was buried on Christmas Day.

Margaret braved all the trials and sufferings of early pioneer life. She learned to be a midwife, and went among the people giving help and comfort wherever needed. Many people were too poor to pay for her services. No night was too dark and no storm too severe for her to brave to give relief to a woman in distress. On one occasion an Indian, by the name of Fisherman, came for her in the middle of the night. His wife was very ill in the wickiup on the Provo River Bottoms near Utah Lake. The Indian thought his squaw was going to die. Margaret went with him and was able to save his squaw and the little papoose. This happened during the troublesome times with the Indians. Sometime later the Indians planned an attack on Fort Midway. This Indian, Fisherman, crawled for several miles through the swamps and rushes in the river bottoms to warn the Watkins family of danger. Through this warning the settlers were prepared and drove the Indians back when they made the attack.

When the Watkins family moved to Midway, Margaret helped with all the pioneering of that section, helping the sick and needy. She was much in demand being the only midwife there and was called "Aunty" by the community. She was the mother of eight children. She died at Midway at the age of 74, and was buried in the Midway Cemetery.

Children of John Watkins and Margaret Ackhurst:

Mrs. Charles Edward (Elizabeth) Allen
John Thomas, married Mary Maria Clift
Edward, married Margaretha Abplanalp
Mrs. Nicholas (Mary) Andrews
Samuel Richard, died in infancy
Alfred, married Lenora Lewis
Fredrick, died in infancy
Charles, died at birth

Betsy, a half-sister of Harriet, married Thomas Alsop and they made their home near Salt Lake. Harriet lived with them. John Watkins and his wife, Margaret, visited the Alsops and met Harriet who was a

young, attractive girl. John Watkins asked Harriet to be his second wife. She consented and went to Provo to live with her husband and Margaret. John soon built a new house for his two wives and children. In 1865, they moved to Midway. Harriet was a kind, capable woman who loved her family and was devoted to her children. She was patient and wise. Her high intelligence was passed on to her offspring. On the night of March 10, 1884 one of the worst blizzards that had ever occurred in Midway raged over the valley. The snow drifts piled high. It seemed that the very end of the world had come. Harriet was frantic with fear. On the morning of the 11th, ill with labor pains, she gave birth to a baby son, Archie. Just when they thought everything was all right, quietly and peacefully, she died, leaving her little one-hour old baby.

Children of John Watkins and Harriet Steel:

Henry, married Jane Ellis Alder
David James, died in childhood
Lorenzo John, died in infancy
Arthur, married Emily Adelia Gerber
Mrs. John Edward (Laura) Clift
William, married Mary Elizabeth Busby
Mrs. John (Maria) Morton
Eva, died in infancy
Frank, married Esabel McKowen
Albert Ernest, married Mary Hannah Harrison
Sylvanus, married 1. Daisy Box, 2. Jessie Gills
Harriet Amy, died in infancy
Archie, married Julia Edna McCaffarty.

Mary Ann Sawyer Watkins, with her parents, joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Swansea, Wales.

Mary Ann Sawyer crossed the ocean with her mother and father and her ten-year-old sister on the sailing vessel "Samuel S. Curlin" in 1856. It was a long, slow voyage. Her father, Joseph Sawyer, cooked for the passengers to pay their passage to New York. Later the family moved to the New Jersey side, to a town called Tomas River which was a very historical place during the Revolutionary War. It had many industries and the opportunities for work were much better.

The Sawyers were anxious to emigrate to Utah to join the Latter-day Saints, so Mary Ann and her sister, Henrietta, picked cranberries and huckleberries in the bogs earning money to add to the fund for emigrating to Utah.

James Brown and his brother, Sam, hauled freight to Salt Lake City, took contracts to assemble ox teams and covered wagons for the trip. James offered to bring the Sawyers to Utah if Mary Ann's father, Joseph Sawyer, would work all winter for him without pay, drive and care for two yoke of oxen and a covered wagon load of freight for this service. Mary Ann's mother rode in the wagon, but the father and the two girls had to walk all the way and help drive the loose stock. The possessions they could take included some bedding, a few dishes, cooking utensils, clothing and food.

Joseph Sawyer fulfilled his part of the contract and expected to leave in the spring of 1860; but James Brown refused to take him in the first company, and he had to come a few weeks later with the next company.

Jesse Murphy was captain of the company. They had a hard, tiresome trip as was common to the pioneers, on one occasion they were attacked by Indians, but were miraculously saved and left unharmed. They arrived in Salt Lake City late in the summer of 1860. There they lived for some time enduring hardship and privation.

Mary Ann's father managed to buy a lot in the business section of Salt Lake City. When the family moved to Provo, her father sold the lot for a bushel of potatoes and a pair of secondhand shoes.

After they moved to Provo, they soon became active in all the pioneer activities of the community. Mary Ann and her sister, Henrietta, were very attractive young women and became very popular in social activities.

At this time John Watkins was leader of the Provo Brass Band and very popular in musical circles. He became attracted to Mary Ann, and married her as his third wife with full consent of his two wives.

Mary Ann took an active part in Church affairs of the town. She suffered all the hardships and privations of pioneer life, helping in the fields, gleaning wheat, and assisting in every way possible. She took an active part in civic affairs. She had a good voice and was active in concerts, choirs and early dramas of the town and county.

For many years she was counselor to Charlotte Gurney in the Midway Relief Society. At the death of Sister Gurney she

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became president of the organization in 1892 and served in that capacity until 1903.

Her responsibilities were great, caring for the poor and needy, sewing for and taking care of the dead, as there were no undertakers in those days, and she sang at most of the funerals.

When Harriet died, she left nine motherless children, one only an hour old. Mary Ann took the entire family and became mother to them. In addition, she had eleven children of her own, making a total of twenty children she had to mother.

When her husband, John Watkins, became Bishop, it added many new responsibilities for her, but she never complained. She had a cheerful disposition, radiated sunshine wherever she went, making many friends.

After the death of John Watkins, she sold the home at Midway and moved to Salt Lake where she later married John Halbom. She died at Salt Lake City and was buried in the Wasatch Lawn Cemetery.

Children of John Watkins and Mary Ann Sawyer:

Joseph Watkins, married Elinor Blood
Thomas John Edward, died in infancy
Walter, died in youth
Mrs. Fredrick (Henrietta) Barben
Mrs. William (Mary Ann) Schaer
George Tranham Watkins, married Sarah Frances Ohlwiler
Mrs. Edward A. (Margaret) Probst
Mrs. Orson Thomas (Sarah Ruby) Speirs
Nymphus Jay, married Estella Thomas
Tracy Sawyer, married Hannah Florence Young
Mrs. Keros Harry (Lily) Serle.